

**STATEMENT OF
SARA BRAASCH, REGIONAL ASSISTANT CHIEF
NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BEFORE THE
SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTRY, CONSERVATION
AND RURAL REVITALIZATION
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. I am pleased to be here today to report on our progress in implementing the Technical Service Provider (TSP) provisions of the 2002 Farm Bill. The TSP provisions were authorized in Sec. 1242. of Title II of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (2002 Farm Bill). It is designed to ensure the Department of Agriculture has the capacity to address the significantly increased workload associated with implementing 2002 Farm Bill conservation programs.

The Farm Bill directed the Secretary of Agriculture to establish a certification process approving individuals and entities to provide technical assistance to carry out conservation programs under this title. It also directed the Secretary to establish the amounts and methods for payments for that assistance. The Secretary delegated those authorities and directives to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). I am here today to report on our progress in achieving these directives.

NRCS has worked with more than 2,100 TSPs, obligating \$163.5 million from fiscal year 2003 through 2006, thereby providing over one million hours of technical assistance through private and non-Federal governmental organizations to attain additional conservation achievements.

NRCS' mission is "helping people help the land," and I am delighted to have this opportunity to tell you how the TSP provisions allow us to add capacity to our workforce in a flexible manner, and enables us to extend a broad range of technical services to private landowners.

Increasing Demand for Technical Assistance

NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to help our customers care for the natural resources on their land. As a result of our assistance, land managers and communities take a comprehensive approach to the use and protection of soil, water, and related natural resources on America's private lands.

Since 2002, NRCS has provided assistance to one million farmers and ranchers. With our assistance, they have applied conservation on more than 130 million acres of working farm and ranchland in addition to 60 million acres enrolled in land retirement and

easement programs, such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) and the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP). We have also invested \$6.6 billion of the taxpayers' funds directly with farmers and ranchers to produce environmental improvements that will benefit everyone. Since enactment of the 2002 Farm Bill, our conservation partner organizations (local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Resource Conservation and Development Councils, State and local governments, and other conservation organizations) have contributed more than \$2.8 billion to conservation programs, making the total investment under the 2002 Farm Bill through last year, more than \$9.4 billion.

We recognized that with this historic increase in conservation funding, the need for technical information and advice exceeds the capacity of our Federal workforce to respond in a timely manner. Also, a significant percentage of the NRCS workforce will be eligible to retire within the next 5 years, a factor that compounds the challenge for the Agency to deliver conservation technical assistance.

With these considerations, NRCS developed a strategy to manage human capital resources that includes the use of private individuals, business entities, non-government organizations, and non-Federal government organizations as TSPs. This will expand our capacity to ensure that we provide the right skills, in the right locations, and deliver high quality conservation products and services.

Adding Technical Assistance Capacity

Our customers should receive the best technical information that we can provide. Effective stewardship depends on having science-based information and technology that are up-to-date, easily accessible, and designed to meet user needs. TSP assistance is a tool for NRCS to use to extend capacity, in a flexible manner, in meeting the demand for technical information and advice to implement conservation programs.

NRCS can address technical assistance demand through a combination of three methods: 1) Individual Technical Service Providers--this is when a participant contracts directly with a TSP for the technical services needed, 2) Contribution and Cooperative Agreements for Technical Services--this is when the Agency contracts directly with a TSP, and 3) the Agricultural Conservation Enrollees Seniors (ACES) program to support the TSP provisions. I will discuss each of these in detail.

Individual Technical Service Providers

First, farmers and ranchers can hire individual certified TSPs to help them plan and apply conservation work. NRCS enters into a contract agreement with the producer to hire the TSP to complete technical work, and then the Agency reimburses the producer for the cost of the technical service.

Landowners and producers can locate TSPs certified in their State and county from our on-line tool called the TechReg Web site (<http://techreg.usda.gov>). It is a convenient way for the producer to locate and choose certified TSPs who can help them meet their conservation goals.

TechReg is an Internet-based system for approving and listing individuals and business entities that are qualified to provide technical services.

Through TechReg, a TSP can register to provide technical services for many categories of work, and in multiple locations. TSPs may provide assistance in 42 different technical service categories. The categories listed on the official TechReg Web site, with details about criteria that qualifies a TSP, include such areas of expertise as Land Treatment - Tillage and Erosion; Nutrient Management - Organic and Inorganic (Current); Pest Management; Land Treatment - Vegetative Land Stabilization; Land Treatment - Buffer; Wetlands (Interdisciplinary) Biological Components; Certified Conservation Planner (Current); Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) Development - Nutrient Management and total CNMP Development; and Channel and Streambank Stabilization.

Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to report that, at the end of June 2006, NRCS had over 2,100 individuals, more than 200 businesses certified as TSPs, and an additional 150 individual applications pending review and certification.

As examples of their importance to our work, engineering services purchased from TSPs gives us flexibility to add expertise when budgets expand, and to better adjust technical assistance without having to eliminate critical permanent positions when budgets contract.

Nutrient management planning, rural land appraisals, engineering services, and cultural resources reviews are all critical areas where our in-house capabilities have been limited. NRCS has kept up with the demand for services by using TSPs that are certified to provide these services.

For example, an Indiana producer working with a TSP increased corn production as a result of EQIP nutrient and pest management plans. Developing these plans improved the plant stand by making planting adjustments while reducing the amount of phosphorus and atrazine applied. Scouting for insects and the use of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) identified secondary insects needing treatment. The producer was very happy with the increase in yield as a result of this TSP assistance.

NRCS has reached out aggressively to establish formal relationships through Memoranda of Understanding with 14 key certifying organizations. The goal is to forge a partnership and cooperate on bringing qualified TSP assistance to working lands farmers and ranchers. These groups include the American Society of Agronomy, the Certified Professionals in Erosion and Sediment Control, Inc., the Society for Range Management, the American Forage and Grassland Council, the Wildlife Society, the American Fisheries Society, the Association of Consulting Foresters, the American Registry of Professional Animal Scientists, Iowa State University, University of Tennessee, the Irrigation Association, Validus, the National Alliance of Independent Crop Consultants, and the Society of American Foresters.

Contracts and Contribution Agreements for Technical Services

Second, NRCS may obtain technical support services directly through procurement contracts, contribution agreements, cooperative agreements, or other appropriate instruments for obtaining technical assistance services.

These agreements are established through a project proposal process with a Request for Proposals. Governmental and non-government private organizations bid on specific projects to provide technical services.

Cooperative agreements provide technical assistance to perform specific deliverable technical products that producers need to complete projects such as riparian forest buffer plantings, cultural resource reviews or environmental assessments.

For example, in Montana, NRCS has been successful in improving habitat for Threatened and Endangered (T&E) species such as: bull trout, west-slope cutthroat trout, and the fluvial arctic grayling. NRCS bundled together habitat restoration practices used on private working lands, to restore stream conditions in the Blackfoot and Big Hole River Watersheds.

Contribution agreements bring matching funds from the successful organization to projects contracted to provide technical assistance. Using TSP funds, Vermont NRCS developed a contribution agreement with the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, and Vermont Conservation Districts. This agreement established Land Treatment Planners that were strategically located across Vermont to develop the land treatment component of CNMPS. This agreement has been highly successful in addressing a critical conservation need for Vermont livestock producers.

Historically, private-sector entities have received 62.25 percent of the TSP investment, which equals roughly \$101.8 million of the overall investment of \$163.5 million in TSP technical assistance. Below is a list showing the distribution of obligations to individuals, businesses and non-government entities.

FY 2005 TSP Obligations by Entity	
Private Sector (producer contracts and agency contracts/agreements with TSPs)	62.2%
State Government	15.9%
SWCD	9.4%
NGO	3.7%
RC&D Associations	2.8%
Local Government	2.0%
Tribal Government	1.7%
Universities	1.7%
Other	0.4%
Federal Government	0.1%

We are excited about these partnerships and the prospect of third party expertise continuing to complement our ongoing work. We have made use of this extra capacity to achieve important performance goals in assistance to livestock producers in developing CNMPs. Third Parties have been particularly helpful in conducting appraisals for conservation easements to complete restoration of valuable wetlands and in addressing cultural resource issues.

Agricultural Conservation Experienced Seniors (ACES)

And finally, NRCS implemented a pilot project called Agricultural Conservation Experienced Seniors (ACES) to support the TSP provisions and expand the number of available technical experts even further. ACES is a cost-effective means of obtaining experienced older workers (age 40 or older, but targeting retired seniors) to allow NRCS employees the flexibility to meet high conservation workload demands. NRCS entered into an agreement with a nonprofit organization, the National Older Worker Career Center (NOWCC), that will recruit, familiarize, place, pay, and support participants selected to assist in addressing the conservation workload. Some of the workers are retired NRCS, retired non-NRCS natural resource professionals, former district employees, and other professionals, administrative and clerical, and technical. NRCS has 148 ACES positions throughout the Agency.

The employees hired through this pilot receive a stipend, and work on a temporary basis for 16 to 32 hours a week. The ACES participant's work is monitored by an NRCS employee, but he or she is not considered a Federal employee as they work for the partnering organization. Approximately \$1.9 million dollars have been obligated to support staff positions under this program throughout NRCS since it began in 2005.

A proposal has been submitted to Congress to broaden the Secretary of Agriculture's authority to contract services of experienced conservation professionals, 40 years or older, under the ACES program.

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance and oversight of this program are important goals of implementation. NRCS established national certification, certification renewal, decertification, and recertification processes for TSPs. To monitor the competence of TSPs, NRCS switched from a self-certification process in fiscal year 2005 to a verification process that enables State Conservationist to check a TSP's qualifications prior to certification.

In March 2006, NRCS began the mandatory 3-year certification renewal of TSPs. This requires NRCS to review the qualifications of TSPs and verify they are still qualified to provide technical service in the categories they selected. This review ensures that projects completed meet NRCS standards and project documentation requirements.

Conclusion

In conclusion Mr. Chairman, TSPs have been a tremendous help in implementing the conservation provisions in partnership with NRCS employees across the Nation.

There are still areas where NRCS needs to work to make the TSP provisions the most efficient, effective tool it can be. These areas include improving the role of certifying organizations that provide assurance that TSPs are qualified; improving farmer and rancher acceptance of TSP services; and, meeting farmer and rancher environmental requirements, such as clean water protection or endangered species habitat improvement, using TSP assistance.

The TSP provisions help NRCS to be flexible in adding capacity when our program workload demands require more technical assistance and in rapidly reducing our commitment when budgets are tightened.

As we move forward, we will accelerate the use of third-party sources of technical assistance. We recognize that the workload posed by future demands for conservation will increase significantly. In order to meet that demand, we will continue to seek resources to complement our existing technical resources with a cadre of qualified experts.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to appear here today. We appreciate your continuing support for the conservation provisions of the 2002 Farm Bill. I would be happy to respond to any questions that Members might have.